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Review of "The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America"

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Roy Morris, Jr., *The Long Pursuit Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle With Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America*. New York: Collins, 2009.

As the name implies, *The Long Pursuit: Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle with Stephen Douglas for the Heart and Soul of America* by Roy Morris, Jr. (New York, New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2008) is a *dual* biography about two of the most-pivotal personalities in United States' history – one highly-revered, and the other highly-lionized and now virtually forgotten. It can loosely be categorized in that *genre* of parallel biography known as the *dyad*, which was pioneered by Plutarch during the late-first and early-second centuries of the Christian era. Whereas Plutarch illuminated the common moral virtues and vices of his subjects, who lived at different times and were products of different cultures, in a sequential-manner, Morris intertwines the lives of Lincoln and Douglas into one running, overlapping narrative. This interpolation of information results in a biography that highlights the political *duel* between these two ambitious men from the prairies of Illinois.

Morris deftly toggles back-and-forth between his two subjects, devoting an equal amount of column space to each. The sections about Lincoln have a reassuringly rehearsed familiarity about them – bordering on stolid – akin to a comfortable, but worn, overcoat; all the information one expects to find is there, rendering an air of accuracy to the entire work. The sections devoted to Douglas introduce details about him that add an edge to the narrative propelling the story forward; one can sense the dynamism of “the Little Giant.” Material relating to Douglas that in more-conventional biographies about Lincoln are distilled into a few paragraphs – or a chapter or two at best – are given free-range throughout the book. This allows for a more thorough examination of the views of both men regarding the critical issues of their day. The result can be a little unnerving for anyone who idolizes Lincoln to the point of near-deification.

Lincoln emerges from the resulting narrative a more ambitious politician than what some people may find comfortable. This is especially evident in the sections devoted to the debates held during the now-famous senatorial campaign of 1858. Lincoln's tailoring his message regarding slavery to suit his audience comes across as calculating at times. Even though his nemesis, the incumbent Senator Douglas, is no different, offering subtle nuances on his own positions, by comparison he appears a more-sympathetic character than other Lincoln biographies allow him to be. Politics appears not to have changed much in the intervening sesquicentennial. In-reality, both were attempting to maintain the

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Union by resolving the defining issue of their time, but through different means: one thought it required the limitation- and gradual extinction-of slavery, while the other believed free and slave states could peacefully co-exist *ad infinitum*. The resulting effect is that Lincoln seems less-ethereal, Douglas comes across as more-humane, and both men appear more-accessible.

I do take umbrage with one assessment the author makes regarding the strategy pursued by these two great statesmen. Morris purports to prove that Douglas' political career was dedicated to protecting the rights of the majority, whereas Lincoln was a champion of minority rights. I do not think the record supports this thesis. Initially the *Three-fifths Compromise* artificially weighted the power-structure of the federal government in favor of the propertied "slavocracy" of the South, necessitating politicians aspiring to higher-office address the concerns of this small but influential class of men. Douglas' political career reflects the balancing act of appealing to one section of the country while simultaneously not alienating the other; he would need both Northern *and* Southern Democrats to get elected chief magistrate of the land. Lincoln, on the other hand, appeared to recognize the inexorable demographic shift that was altering the political landscape. He appealed to the "better angels of our nature," planting his flag firmly on the moral high-ground. Ultimately his view prevailed, but only after the bloodiest war in America's history, and a protracted period of reconciliation, which we are still working through.

Towards the end-of-the-book, after having lost the presidential election to Lincoln, Douglas reveals his true stripes when, as a patriot, he places *The Constitution* and Union over party identity, suborning his own political ambition. Shortly after Douglas died, Lincoln revealed much about his own character when he eulogized Douglas as

a great statesmen . . . a man who nobly discarded party for his country. A Senator who forgot all prejudices in an earnest desire to serve the republic. A patriot, who defended with equal zeal and ability the constitution as it came to us from our fathers, and whose last mission upon earth was that of rallying the people of his own State of Illinois, as one man, around the glorious flag of our Union.

Abraham Lincoln, who was master of the analogy, if pressed, might have fittingly summed-up their respective careers with an allusion to Æsop's fable on the tortoise and the hare. I think a more *à-propos* epilogue for both of these great statesmen can be found in *Proverbs* 27:17:

"As iron sharpens iron,
so one man sharpens another."

Certainly Lincoln recognized that he was a greater man for having dueled on the field of ideas with a man of comparable skills and intellect.

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It is interesting how history turns-out – especially when it is interpreted by later generations. The competition between Lincoln and Douglas is analogous to that contest between Thomas Jefferson and Alexander Hamilton of an earlier era: today we remember best the contributions of Jefferson – the author of the *Declaration of Independence* – but we live in a world that reflects the values of Hamilton. Not all analogies are congruent, however. Unlike Hamilton, Lincoln won both the battle with his chief rival *and* earned the undying respect and affection of Americans since. To truly be fair and present the narrative outlined in this tome from a perspective that more-accurately relates how close-run the competition between these two towering personalities was, the title of the work should probably be *The Long Pursuit: Stephen Douglas and Abraham Lincoln's Thirty-Year Struggle for the Heart and Soul of America*. It is regrettable that more works of this ilk are not produced, showing the intimate symbiosis between antagonists that produce the world in which we live. Perhaps if they were, we would better understand the processes of history.

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